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Unions knock Leggett budget

FOP says lack of raises violates arbitrator's ruling

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Multimedia:



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Some Montgomery County union leaders are lashing out at County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) because his \$4.3 billion budget proposal for fiscal 2011 includes layoffs, furloughs and wage freezes.

Walter Bader, chief negotiator and past president of the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 35, says Leggett illegally denied police officers the pay raises they were to receive in their negotiated contracts.

"He's required to put in what's in the contract," Bader said of Leggett. "He's required to do that. If he doesn't then he is in violation of the law."

Under Leggett's proposed budget, released Monday, as many as 232 county employees could lose their jobs, and most government employees will be forced to take 10 days of unpaid leave.

"There is pain in the budget for our community and our county employees," Leggett said at a Monday press conference.

Leggett's plan includes no pay raises — either step increases or cost-of-living raises — for county employees.

The proposed furlough days will apply only to non-uniformed employees and exempts police officers, firefighters, correctional officers and others, said Joseph Beach, director of the county's Office of Management and Budget.

An arbitrator ruled March 3 in favor of the police union, granting some officers step increases and maintaining officers' access to reimbursement for tuition.

The \$840,000 tuition reimbursement program, which has come under fire for being mismanaged, was abolished in Leggett's proposed budget.

Bader said the tuition assistance program also is part of the police officers' contracts and should be maintained.

"Now, not to comply with the law would be a very dangerous and short-sighted approach by Mr. Leggett because in the years when we have lost we have always honored the arbitrator's award," Bader said.

The union could "run to the County Council and turn the process into chaos," he said.

Gino Renne, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994/Municipal and County Government Employees Organization, said he also planned to lobby the County Council to reverse Leggett's proposals.

"It all goes to council. We'll fight it out there," Renne said.

The union's goal, he said, is to eliminate the layoffs and furloughs in Leggett's budget. Last week, Renne said MCGEO would reopen contract talks with the county if the arbitrator ruled that FOP members should receive pay increases.

"It's going to be a very difficult couple of months for the council," said Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park. "These are not easy challenges."

The council will begin to take up the budget in the next few weeks, and will vote on it the week before Memorial Day.

MCGEO represents some employees who are exempt from furloughs, including correctional officers, sheriff's deputies and others. However, the bulk of the furloughed workers belong to MCGEO or are unrepresented.

"If there are going to be furloughs they should be across the board," Renne said. "No one should be exempt."

Beach said county officials are recommending five fixed furlough days, taking place near holidays, and five rolling days that employees can choose. However, the details of furloughs must be worked out with the government employees union.

Leggett's proposed fiscal 2011 budget fills a projected \$779 million budget hole, but he said that even if his budget proposal is approved, the county is facing a \$200 million shortfall in fiscal 2012.

His fiscal 2011 budget is a 3.8 percent reduction in spending over the current fiscal year, which ends June 30. Under his proposal, the county's budget would shrink for the first time since the 1968 approval of the county charter.

However, Bader questioned whether the county could really not afford pay raises for employees, and a MCGEO flyer delivered by e-mail accused Leggett of turning his back on labor.